FICTION

Follow Me, Boys

Kristen Carson

The station hall echoed with the rumble of waiting buses every time the door opened. The restroom door squeaked. A mother on the far row of chairs scolded her child—"Don't climb on that!"—as her breasts threatened to spill out of her tank top.

April hoped Marc was too occupied with the leaves and carbons of his bus ticket to notice the difference between his own send-off and the one the family had given Kevin, just two years ago. Back then, Mom, Dad, and nine Feldsted kids had spilled out of a van big enough for a reform school. Dad had cornered Kevin, man to man, and pulled out his wallet. Mom smiled through her tears and rubbed her hugely pregnant belly. When the bus chugged away, Kevin smiled out the window while they all waved wildly, shouting "Have fun at college!"

Now, as the station door swung shut behind them, the bus engine growled, spewing a cloud of fumes, its cargo doors opened up like bent insect legs.

April studied the bus driver, wondering if he was the kind who counted heads after a lunch stop or if he just drove on with a shrug and a glance at his watch. She hesitated, then threw her arms around Marc's neck. "Dad would've come if he could," she told him.

"Yeah, sure." With one last mirthless smile, he was up the steps. Then she could only watch his face through the window.

Seemed like she'd been seeing Marc that way all summer—from a distance.

That day in June, when she and Ginni Runyon sat outside the library, he'd been just a dark-haired dot across the river.

With only a few minutes left before Ginni had to go back to shelving books, the two girls had watched him guiding the lawnmower over the

bumps and hillocks of the hospital lawn. "I'm wondering if he's wearing the boots," said April.

"What boots?"

"Our neighbor, Mr. Golonka died. And Mrs. Golonka brought over a pair of his boots. She thought maybe we could get some good use out of them."

"How awful!" A liver-smelling grimace marred Ginni's face. "What kind of boots are they? Cowboy boots? Rain boots?"

"No. Kind of square-toed. Zippers up the sides."

"What happened?"

"Well," said April, picking at the crusts left from Ginni's lunch, "all the princes of the realm had to try on the shoe, of course. Actually, just Dad, Marc, and Tom."

"And?"

"They fit Marc."

"And he wore them?"

"No, he refused. But Dad thundered, 'They're perfectly good boots! The day I refuse to wear a pair of perfectly good boots . . . '"

"By the way," April peered into a long Tupperware box at the end of the table, "there's like a dozen cookies in here. Are you running a concession stand or something?"

"I wouldn't give me a hard time if I were you," said Ginni. "Not unless I wanted to be teased about those loose threads clinging to my shirt."

April looked down and flicked off a pink one. "Ah, the fate of someone whose mother sews for a living. Hey, aren't these the same cookies we had at your house Sunday night?"

"Fresh batch. Marc liked them, so I made more."

"Ginni, Ginni, what am I going to do to cure you of my brother?"

"I don't wish to be cured. Oh, and after your family left, my mom said she felt sorry for you, like you won't have any fun all summer, working for your mother like this."

"It's just the cooking and the errand-running. The LadyForm Bra Company is putting a lot of pressure on Mom. 'Ship us more or lose your job to Hong Kong.' So she's got to turn out enough bra bows to fill four or five boxes a week instead of the usual two or three. But, hey, I don't mind. Errands can be stretched, you know."

A sharp whistle pierced the air. The girls looked across the river. Marc waved at them.

"Well, well," said April, "there's my Irish twin."

Ginni raised an eyebrow. "Maybe it's his lunch break, too." She opened the Tupperware lid and arranged the cookies in more perfect rows.

Marc's head appeared over the crest of the bridge. He was not handsome. Nature had given him his mother's overbite, his dad's thick neck and square body. April, to her sorrow, had inherited the same square body, softened only by a smattering of freckles across her nose.

His hand dove into the cookies as soon he got to the table.

The day was a fine one, with a touch of breeze blowing in from the Atlantic, thirty miles away. It was the kind of noon in June that inspired the firemen across the street to pull the trucks out of the bay, hose them down, shine them up. The weather drew lunch-hour walkers to the brick path along the river, which was actually more like a lazy canal. Cars with windows down and bumpers declaring "Carter/Mondale" hurried over the bridge.

Then a pair of paramedics strode out the emergency room door, hopped into an ambulance, and pulled out of the driveway, siren whining. Well, for someone out there, it was not such a fine day.

"Remember when we used to go to the Dairy Queen just because we might see an ambulance going down the boulevard?" April asked.

"And as we watched it go," said Ginni, "you all made sure I remembered that your dad worked at the hospital. No, no, admit it, you wanted me to think he was the doctor that'd be on the scene, sewing on dismembered parts. Come on, admit it."

"Okay, okay," Marc laughed. "So we didn't tell you he was just the plant engineer."

"Well, you could have told me that it was the engineer's job to stand there, handing the half-dead over to the nurses or something. I probably would've believed you."

"No, his job's a lot duller than that. About the only drama he gets is the irate phone call. 'The light bulb's out! The toilet's overflowing! Send somebody quick!' But I guess it's not a bad job for someone who hasn't got the courage or the imagination to do anything else."

"Marc!" April glared at him.

He just shrugged and took another cookie. "Gotta go, ladies," he laughed, and swung off the bench.

* * *

Erval Feldsted left the hospital at 5:30 every evening.

Marc sat beside him in the car. The boy smelled of good honest sweat after a long day of mowing the hospital grounds, a job Erval had gotten for him the day after Marc's graduation. Now that they worked together, the father looked forward to talking shop as he negotiated the turns and stoplights of the route home.

The boy never said much. Dried twists of hair clung to his forehead. A stripe of skin, glowing white against his sunburned neck, peeked out from his t-shirt. He was tired, probably. But it was a good kind of tired, right?

Erval was always telling his kids that. That, and "Work makes things happen. Work brings rewards." Why, since Ruthalin had started sewing for the LadyForm Bra Company, the kids could have things like school pictures every year.

And Erval's own sweat equity had dotted the "I's" and crossed the "T's" on their house.

After turning by the meat-packing plant that blew out the smell of bacon for a half-mile radius, Erval motored down a curbless road, a strip of asphalt that wasn't sure whether it was city or country. Power wash stalls gave way to simple frame houses, ending finally in stands of pine. His car pulled into the driveway at the end of the road, crunching over the pine cones and the gravel.

And there it was: his house.

Nobody thought he could pull it off. Brick, with four bedrooms (five, if you counted the pass-through room at the corner, where the three youngest boys bunked), and a kitchen big enough to seat all his ten children at dinner.

Some people had said, "Why not pick a dream that won't hurt so bad when you can't get it?" But he had gotten it. He had come out here after work, night after night, laying brick for the fireplace, debating window choices with Ruthalin. "Well, sure, casements for the family room would be nice, but we don't have the budget for it."

And when it was done, he had moved his family out of the aging white hulk they'd been living in, over in the broken-sidewalk part of town.

Now, he shifted the car into park. He reached for the door handle, only to face the black rubber gasket hanging from the door frame. Darn, but the thing was sagging again. The glue that held it in place always weak-

ened in heat like this. He stuffed it into its channel again with no faith that it would stay there.

Marc, still silent, jumped from the car with more energy than you'd expect from somebody so exhausted. He dashed past this man, this creature that no eighteen-year-old ever wanted to become: hairy arms jutting out from his short-sleeved work shirt. A lone, thin tuft of hair holding its ground against the field of baldness on the top of his head. Shoulders drooping from the weight of the briefcase.

Erval frowned at the windows. He looked at the cracked and peeling paint. And those little moisture pockets that dewed up in the corners last winter—he shouldn't have gone with the cheaper models when he built this house. But it wasn't as if he had a big budget to work with, like at the hospital.

He walked past the couch in the garage. This was one of his "finds." It sat out in a wheat field one day as he drove by. He had slowed the van, all the kids moaning, "Dad, no! Please!"

But he had stopped anyway. "Looks to be in pretty good shape," he said, circling around, inspecting.

"Dad, don't! Remember the dryer?"

But he ignored their groans. "Help me load this thing in."

Now he shuffled through the gloomy garage and opened the door he had hung. He stepped onto the linoleum he had laid, where a few wisps of ever-present thread blew along the baseboards. He sniffed the air to see what might be cooking. Smelled like something with Campbell's soup in it.

He put down his briefcase just as Heidi clumped by wearing a pair of boots, square-toed, with zippers up the side, much too big for her young feet. He pushed past Olivia, her nose planted in yet another summer-love library book. In the corner of the family room, his wife bent over her sewing machine. He leaned down for a kiss, his cheek brushing the heat-dampened curls at her neck. She handed him the latest aerogramme from Kevin.

When April finally called the family to dinner, Erval took his seat at the head of the long table. He turned to Marc for another try at the shop talk. "Watson giving you any trouble?"

"Nah." Marc was freshly showered, his wet hair carefully combed, the sleeves of his white dress shirt rolled up.

"Keep an eye on him, if you could, for me. Kind of quiet-like, you

know. Watson doesn't work any harder than he has to. Seems like he's always off flirting with the X-ray techs or taking another smoke break."

"I saw him smoking at the Chevron station," said Tom.

Erval looked down the long table, past the two milk jugs, past the many small hands grasping for the bread plate. He nodded to his wife. "See what kind of fellow I have to put up with? I'd fire him, but it's not easy these days."

"That's what I mean," said Tom. "Maybe you won't have to fire him. Maybe he'll just sort of," he snickered, "fire himself."

A smile twitched at the corner of Erval's mouth, but he fought it off.

The doorbell rang.

Marc stood up. He wiped milk off his lip and grabbed the tie that hung on the back of the chair.

And Russ Buckman stood in the Feldsted family kitchen.

"Home teaching tonight?" asked Erval.

Marc mumbled good-bye and followed Russ out the door.

Russ Buckman was a slip-on shoes kind of guy. He jingled coins in his pocket. He snapped his gum. He entered a room, scanned the action and rubbed the beard shadow on his chin. He planted his hands on his hips and demanded, without saying a word, *When do we get started?*

You could always tell when Marc had been out with Russ. For the next day or two, parts and pieces of Russ spilled out of Marc like socks out of a laundry basket. Drive past a roadhouse and Marc told you, "Russ says they have the best oysters this side of Baltimore." Let Mom and Dad dress up for the annual hospital dinner at Ocean City's Queen Ann Hotel and it was, "Russ says they do a mean Beef Wellington."

Clearly this was a guy that got around, and in style, too, because "Russ ordered his Thunderbird straight from the factory. It came with a blue roof and he sent it back because he'd ordered *white.*"

In a house where couches that "looked to be in pretty good shape" just got adopted off the roadside, such tales were met with stunned silence. Who was this guy? Son of a brain surgeon? Spoiled by summer camps, stereos, and ski vacations?

Not according to Marc. "Russ had a childhood about like Al Broadnax."

"Who's Al Broadnax?"

"You know, the head of the American Winners Institute. Russ is reading a book about him. Russ says Al reminds him of himself and the

way he scrambled around as a kid, collecting bottles, mowing lawns. And now Al's a rich man. Owns a huge ranch in Colorado, raises horses. He and his sons go golfing in Scotland every year. Russ'll loan me the book when he's done."

"So I take it that Russ wants to be just like Al."

"Something like that." Russ had plans, big plans, Marc said. "Russ always says, 'Too many people are content with splashing around in a plastic, kiddie-pool kind of life when they could have the whole tile-terraced, palm-tree version.'" Russ wasn't going to stick forever with traveling the roads of three states, selling vent hoods to all the Denny's and Arby's and the Joe's Bar and Grills along the way. Not that it was a shame to do that. No, not at all. Unless you were satisfied to keep doing it year after year.

Marc could hardly wait to get his hands on the Broadnax book. Until then, Russ kept him busy with something else.

* * *

The voice coming from Marc's room had the fervor of a preacher, warmed up just enough for the sweat marks to break through his suit coat. "You KNOW it, in your mind and your heart, that you WANT what I've been talking about." How had someone gotten into the house? And why did he have to make it so hard for April to read her Ann Landers?

April peered into Marc's room. Nobody strange or new in there. Just Tom on the top bunk, and Marc on the bottom, bathed in a cone of light shining down from his headboard lamp, and Mom's tape player on his belly.

Back in her own room, she could still hear the voice's fire and cajolery through the closet wall. She heard Tom: "Some of us are trying to sleep in here!"

It was the time of night when Mom turned out the last kitchen light and Dad locked all the doors. In the bathroom, toothpaste foam escaped April's mouth as the voice, now moved to the living room, shouted about someone "willing to be paid just enough, JUST ENOUGH, to keep him an eyelash above BROKE."

April peeked around the corner. Marc switched the tape off as their dad walked into the room. "Whatcha got there?" Erval asked, his thumbs in his belt as he looked down at his son on the floor.

"Just a speech."

"Carter? Ford? Not that Jerry Brown guy, I hope."

"No, Dad."

Erval sat on the couch. "I didn't know you were interested in politics." The father propped one leg over the other and settled in, draping his arm along the back of the couch. Finally, a moment when they could understand each other, man-to-man. His face lit up like a talk show guest's. *Tell us how your new mousetrap works, Mr. Boopquist. Why, certainly. I'd be glad to.*

But Marc just lay there, his hands caged around that tape player, his lips tightly closed.

April didn't want to watch this anymore. She ducked back into the bathroom and spat toothpaste noisily into the running water. She sat on the edge of the tub, cradling her head in her hands, hoping the silence out in the living room had broken. But when she listened, it was still there, as hard as her bones against the white porcelain.

Suddenly her father stood in the bathroom doorway. He examined the wallpaper, which was peeling rather severely. Then he went upstairs.

* * *

Things didn't used to be this way.

Whatever happened to the days when Marc trailed around in the back yard, following Dad as the spinning blades of the lawnmower spat out grass? And when Dad went to the hardware store, who walked right behind him, admiring the same flashlights and extension ladders and screw-in doorstops that Dad admired? Who was it that got in the car first when Mom said, "Anybody want to visit Daddy at work?"

His basement office at Tidewater General was just two doors down from the morgue. The office never failed to enthrall his children, who were allowed to visit in small, manageable platoons. Behind the door labeled "Plant Engineer," men in coveralls met urgent demands, hauling ladders away to check the burny smell just reported in the pediatric wing. Sometimes Dad handed out fifteen cents for you to spend at the vending machines down the hall.

Dad himself worked in an inner sanctum, the beam of his desk lamp shining down on a set of plans just in from the architect. Even April liked to be there, sitting across from him at his desk, coloring a picture, imagining Tidewater General's own version of Joe Gannon somewhere upstairs, valiantly saving the life of some beautiful but reluctant woman who refused surgery on her brain tumor.

Later, at lunch, white-coated doctors, Important Men, walked out of the cafeteria with Dad. They followed him past the elevator, lingered with him outside his office door, discussing the expansion plans up on the fourth floor.

Marc and April would look up at their dad and the doctor, both men talking with their hands. The children watched the passing cast of characters, who all nodded to their father. Women in scrubs. Men in overalls.

A fellow suited up in the best wool, his hair FBI-trim, clicked down the hall in his shined shoes. The bulky briefcase at the end of his arm was embossed with the letters, UPJOHN. He looked deep in thought, pondering the mission ahead of him. Then he brightened as Dad and the doctor parted ways.

"Heyyy, Dr. Herbert. I've got tickets to the Orioles and Tigers. Could you use some?"

The doctor held up a dismissive hand as he returned to work through the construction zone shortcut.

Marc's lips parted. What luck! When had he ever been in the right place at the right time like this? His eyes watched as if the man had just dropped from parted clouds.

The man's good shoes clicked nearer. Dad seemed unaware of his approach. But any second now, the man would tap Dad on the shoulder and offer those tickets. He probably gave them away to Important Men at the hospital, and Dad was Important, no doubt about that.

But when he caught up, he walked on by with the briefest of nods.

Marc couldn't say he'd never been to a baseball game. Three summers ago, Dad had taken them to see the Brandywine Blackbirds.

They had earned their way there, spending six dawns cleaning up the cigarette butts, straw wrappers, and caramel corn at the county fair.

Erval Feldsted had a warm spot for schemes like this. No reason in the world why his children should feel bad that other dads took their kids to baseball games. If the Feldsted children wanted to go, there was always a way. He'd find them a work project. Then, because of what they'd done to earn their place on those bleacher seats, the Feldsted children would appreciate the game more than any other child there. They'd learn for themselves that work is good for the soul, that work makes things happen!

Erval's excitement for the game never quite matched his fervor for the clean-up project. When he got off the phone with the fair chairman, he rubbed his hands together in a way that must have made his old cal-

luses burn. "They said they'd be glad to have more help!" When he herded all of his children ages eight and over into the family van and took his place behind the trucker-sized wheel, he broke into a rapturous "Heidy ho! And away we go!"

Wounded tomato slices that had fallen off sandwiches into the flattened grass; flies on a corncob; toilet bowls clogged with swollen tissue—none of it bothered him. None of it bothered him because he was saving his family from his own unintended mistakes. Sure he was the farmboy that made good; but now, here he was, off the farm, with a bunch of children who couldn't possibly learn those farmboy lessons. It wasn't enough to tell them tales of that day at dawn, and him a thirteen-year-old boy with his eleven-year-old brother, gripping their shovels like Moses' and Aaron's staves as their father pointed down the line of leaning fence posts and sagging barbed wire. It was not enough to tell them how their dad handed them their lunch bags, waved good-bye, and drove the wagon off in a cloud of dust, not returning until the sun dipped behind the distant Utah buttes.

No, there was nothing in the telling that made the children understand. But maybe they'd figure it out, steeped in the rubbish of the county fair.

* * *

"That's not enough! Your neighbor probably wants it, too! But he's AFRAID of success! Just the fact that you're HERE TONIGHT shows something. That shows you're NOT LIKE your neighbor. You're not WILLING to be just barely better than BROKE!" The man on the tape was, no doubt, mopping his forehead with his white hanky now.

April wandered into the living room and slid onto the couch. She thought Marc might turn the tape off again, but he didn't.

" . . . You're not SATISFIED. You know there's something MORE . . . ."

"What is all this?" she asked.

Marc held up a finger and walked into his dark bedroom.

" . . . want it BAD enough. You have to BELIEVE . . . ."

He returned with a brochure. April opened the glossy pages and studied the bottles and the tubes in the pictures.

"Russ sells this stuff," Marc said, "and he's going to get me started

with it. It's all from the moyocuni plant. See, here's the CuniShield. That's from the sap. Just a drop on your pulse points repels insects."

And with the voice on the tape winding up for the altar call, April flipped through pages of ointments and lotions and cosmetics—Cuni-Soft—even household paints, all derived from the lush, white-flowered plant pictured on the front cover.

Actually, it was less like selling, said Marc, and more like just using all the stuff, and showing others how to use it, too. When they learned to use it and introduced it to other people, money began flowing back your way. If you did it right, if you did it the way Russ explained, money came in every month. Buckets full of it. "I mean, all it takes is a couple hours a day. Give up two or three TV shows a day and do this instead. And there you are. You can quit your job, and the cash is still rolling in. I mean, only an idiot would have a job. Right? Only an idiot would carry a briefcase and trip all over himself trying to be somewhere at eight o'clock every morning."

And the speaker ended in a shower of applause that still rang in her head as she laid it on her pillow that night.

* * *

April pushed the doors open and stepped from the cool of the Larkin Building into the hot July noon. Having just handed the telephone company its money—"Hurry, it's too late to mail it," said her mother as she dropped the check into April's hand—she blinked at the bleached-out light of day and jay-walked to the shady side of the street, where she'd parked the family van.

She started the motor, pulled at her shirt where it stuck to her ribs, and glanced up the street at the time and temperature displayed on the Shoreline State Bank. 12:30. Maybe Ginni was on her lunch break now.

April found her at the usual table. Ginni looked up from a magazine.

"Is that the latest *Seventeen*?" April said.

"Nope. Back issue. The only kind they'll let you take out."

April scooted on to the bench and looked at a page portraying a sad girl drawn in frayed pencil lines.

"I was just turning to page 287 to see if she took the bottle of pills or not."

"I see," said April.

Ginni arrived at the back page.

"Well?" April waited. She shouldn't care about the fate of the sad, pencil girl, but these stories—they sucked you in.

"Ooooh, look here!" Ginni pointed to the opposite page. "'Stop Dreaming about Becoming a Stewardess. You're Just Steps Away with This Handy Guide.' Oh, do you have a piece of paper? A pencil?"

"Ginni, why?"

"The uniforms. They look so crisp and cute. No, no, don't roll your eyes. I mean, remember the girl in *Airport?* That belted jumper she wore? And the snappy cuffs on the blouse?"

"She got blown up, for heaven's sake! Why would you want . . . "

"Yes, yes, but before that, she just looked so pretty and efficient, talking on the little speaker phone, with the accent and all."

"Are you going to send away for the accent too?"

Ginni shot her a that-will-do look. "I'm not sending away for anything just yet. I don't have the $3.95. But when I get it . . . "

They heard a sharp whistle from the river. They turned. Marc stood on the bridge, waving.

"Some people," he said, when his shadow fell over the table, "have the time to sit and read a magazine."

"Ginni's just planning how to spend her money."

"Except that I don't have that much," said Ginni. "So I have to plan really good."

"Oh. Well." He swung his legs over the opposite bench and sat. "Maybe I could help you out."

April looked at Ginni. If Marc had ever lent anybody $3.95, it had been a secret up to now.

"You could help me?"

"Sure. And you could help me back, all in the same move."

Ginni raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"You could sell Moyocuni with me."

"Oh, no, no, no, no. Selling's not something I could ever do."

"I know how you feel. Really, I do. I didn't think I could sell anything either. But actually, you don't have to. You've got the product, see? Very good stuff, high quality, helps bug bites and all that. You get it and use it yourself. Then you tell other people about it and get them to try it. And it's so good, naturally they will want to use it all the time . . . "

"That sounds like selling to me," said April.

"No, it's not, because you're just using a product and getting others to do the same. And you train those people to find others to use it. Then, as they move the product, whatever money they make, you get a cut because you found them, trained them, sponsored them. And the people they found and trained—your people get a cut, you get a cut. The possibilities are unlimited."

Ginni gripped the magazine, fingering the corners of the pages. She studied his face, which was frozen like a TV pitchman's, testifying about toothpaste that *really* whitened. "I just don't think I could do all that," she said.

"Believe me, I know how you feel. I felt the same way. But when you think about all that money coming in, you know, and what you could do with it—well, why wouldn't you try something like this if it could buy you your dreams? What are your dreams, anyway? What do you want?"

Ginni froze. No way was she going to tell him what she really wanted.

"Do you want a red Firebird?"

She looked surprised.

"A Corvette? A cute little Volkswagen? Ice-blue maybe?"

Now she looked as if she needed to sneeze.

"No? You're not into cars? How about beachfront property? A seventy-foot yacht? What? What is it? A couple snowmobiles? A private jet?"

"I don't want any of those things."

"Well, you must want something."

"I do. I want this." She held out the open magazine.

He read the fine-print ad. "'Stop Dreaming about Becoming a Stewardess'? You want to be a stewardess?"

"I want to get the book. It'll explain how."

"Why do you want to be one?"

"It's a neat job. You get to travel."

He absorbed this information. "Tell you what. If you'll sign on and help me sell Moyocuni, if you'll work real hard at it, you can travel all you want. You won't need to get a job to do it."

"It's not just the travel," said April. "She wants to wear the uniforms, you know."

He looked, with his brows knit together, as lost as a boyfriend at a baby shower. "So? Buy a bunch of uniforms!" He shook his head. "You know, if you work for the airlines, you're their slave. Sure, you get to travel,

but only where they say and when they say. You probably don't get to see much of Paris or whatever, because you're only there long enough to rest up for the next flight." He shrugged. "But it's up to you. With Moyocuni, nobody tells you what to do. You can take it as far as you want."

And April knew Ginni would say yes. Ginni would do anything for Marc, anything to prove that she wanted what he believed worth wanting.

* * *

Ginni looked happiest when sitting across the picnic table from Marc, studying brochures, learning the party line.

"No, with that kind of person, you don't play up the financial security angle," he told her. "You say, 'You can make friends doing this.' That's what gets 'em."

She looked less happy on the day he said, "Now, let's make a list of people for you to approach." She struggled over the blank page, strangely forgetting every person she had ever met.

"How about your parents?" he said. "That's a natural."

Ginni screwed up her face. The price of love was so high. "Can't we try somebody else?"

"What? You don't think your dad would like to dump his professor job and cruise around the world or something?"

She chewed on the end of her pencil, then brightened. "Maybe it will get him out of his sweater vests and into one of those cool Ascot-tie things." She wrote "Latham and Ada Runyon" across the top of the page.

"You might try the Laid-Off-in-Your-50s approach," Marc told her. "That works great on guys your dad's age."

When the phone rang in the Feldsted kitchen that night, April knew it was Ginni. April heard her voice wailing into Marc's ear.

"Wait!" he told her. "Don't do anything! Tell you what. Meet me at the Dairy Queen."

April followed him out the door and into the car. When they arrived, Russ was already there, patting Ginni's hand as she cried into a pile of red and white napkins.

"He said, 'What's this? You're selling something for school? In the summer? Too bad it's not Girl Scout cookies, har, har. I never turn away Girl Scout cookies, har, har.'" She sniffled. "And then when I told him the price, he goes, 'Twelve-fifty! What—are there little flecks of gold or something in the lotion, har, har, har.' And then, when I suggested how

he could quit his job," she shuddered into another napkin, "he said, 'But I *like* my job. And don't give me that crap about guys getting laid off in their 50s! I have *ten-yure,* young lady! Or don't you even know what that means?' Oh!" she moaned. "I told you I could never do this."

Marc slipped into the booth and put his arm around Ginni. He looked at Russ. Any ideas here?

"Now, Ginni," Russ began, patting her hand. "It *is* Ginni, right? See here, there are no problems in this life. Just opportunities. And do you want to be stuck working at the library all your life? It is the library, right? The library controls your time. They control your money. What does that mean? Right, they control your life. Are you gonna just shrug your shoulders and accept that?"

"And you," he pointed at Marc. "What have I told you a million times already? That's right. You can make excuses, you can make money, but you can't make both. And no wonder we're not making what we ought to. We can't have this negative stuff all the time."

And as Marc took his chewing out like a man, Ginni, still shuddering a little, leaned into the arm he laid across the back of the seat. She was enjoying that part way too much.

* * *

Marc became the Church button-holer. He cornered Dan Keating by the Church drinking fountain. Dan, fresh off the plane from a two-year mission to Guatemala, needed money for school, and fast. Why not see what Moyocuni can do for you, Dan?

Then he went brow to brow with Sister Tarasco. His parents had whispered about the Tarascos for years, about how they were in the bishop's office at least twice a month, pointing fingers at one another for various unspecified marital problems. But finally, they were calling it quits. So Sister Tarasco couldn't just stay home anymore, ignoring her housework. Sure, she could sling mashed potatoes at her children's school lunchroom. But why settle for that when she could act like a kept woman, Moyocuni-style?

Not everybody could be cornered. When men opened the restroom door and saw Marc at the urinals, they backed out. *We can hold it just fine, thanks.*

April was not sure Marc noticed the shunning. He was too full of taped speeches that goaded him to "BELIEVE!"

* * *

The box sat on the kitchen table. Children climbed over it all afternoon. They asked their mother to open it. She looked up from her sewing machine. "It has Marc's name on it. We'll have to wait until he gets home."

When he walked in that evening, his shirt clinging to his chest in the usual wet spots, he moved the box to the floor to make way for a supper of hamburger pot pie, two pans' worth. Then they would not let him delay any longer. He cut the box open with a knife.

Lifting away the flaps, they saw the rows of yellow plastic bottles inside. Ruthalin, the most curious of all, reached inside.

Like a good salesman, Marc let her rub the lotion over her hand, smell it, read the label. "So how much is a bottle?"

"Twelve-fifty."

"What! But the high-dollar stuff down at Rite-Aid is only $2.89."

"But, Mom, the moyocuni is a rare plant. Harvesting it and getting it all the way here from Venezuela and extracting the various parts—well, who would bother if it didn't do all the neat things it does?"

"I just don't see . . ." she shook her head. "I just don't see how you're going to make money selling . . . It's outlandish!"

"It's not so much the selling where I make my money. Mostly I sign up other people to sell under me, and they sign up others. Then, any product that they move, I get a cut."

Erval narrowed his eyes. "Yeah, but first it has to be a good product at a good price."

"Look, Dad, this is the wave of the future. Making a living by producing things is on its way out. The world is changing. People don't want to be chained to desks from nine to five anymore. Don't tell me you wouldn't want that for yourself, Dad. You know how you're always complaining that there's never enough time for the window project or whatever."

Erval's frown lightened a bit. He looked over the yellow bottles like a lawyer considering his next line of attack. "Are you saying this all comes from just a few hours of work a week?"

"Actually, it's a lot more than that at first. But pretty soon, your organization grows. You have money coming in from your downline. And at that point, your time is all your own."

"That's some pretty fancy claims there, son. How well have you looked into this?"

Ruthalin stopped smelling her hand. She put the bottle back on the table.

Marc sighed. "I know what I'm doing, Dad."

Erval put up his hands. "Fine. But it seems to me this is a mighty brave new world we're talking about here. I just don't see how nobody has to go to work. Didja ever think that some fellow has to come in and punch a time clock, to fill all the little yellow bottles with the overpriced Muna-Guna here? . . ."

"Moyocuni, Dad."

" . . . or maybe a chemist has to show up to extract the sap from the plant. And I'm thinking there's got to be a secretary somewhere, keeping track of the shipments."

"Well, Dad, maybe there are people that still want to do that sort of thing."

"No, son, it's not a matter of 'want to.' It's a matter of 'that's how the world works.' People still have to do the things that need . . ."

"Look, Dad, I know what I'm doing. I know the program, and I know it only comes through for you if you are willing to put in a lot of hard work . . ."

"Wait a minute. I thought your Moya-Goya was promising you a life of leisure here . . . "

" . . . and I sure am meeting a lot of people who aren't willing to do what it takes." Marc plopped bottles back into the box, as if to protect them.

"Say, son, you weren't thinking of signing your old dad on to sell little yellow bottles, because . . . "

"No, I sure wasn't, because I don't think you want to stop being poor."

"We're not poor, son," said Erval.

"Marc!" Ruthalin put on the look she always wore when a baseball came through the window. "You shouldn't talk that way about your father! If you could just hear what your aunts and uncles say about him. They're amazed at what he's been able to pull off."

"It doesn't take much to amaze some people, does it?"

" . . . He's gotten an educated job. He's been able to build a house big enough for all of us."

"On which he cut corners all over the place! Yeah, that's the part the aunts and uncles don't see, living all the way out there in Oregon and Utah. They don't see that, maybe if he hadn't chosen the cheapest windows, he wouldn't have to come home from work every night and lose his whole evening cutting wood to replace the rotting sills. Maybe if he'd chosen a carpet pad thicker than a graham cracker, he wouldn't have to dream up work projects to raise money for a better one! I mean, who else do you know that drags their kids out to the fairgrounds to pick up cigarette butts and fry baskets and—and scumbags out behind the cattle barn—"

"There is nothing dishonorable about picking up litter," cried Erval. "And you kids got a baseball game out of that."

"With not enough money to buy a hot dog!"

"Do you know how much a hot dog costs, son?"

"And we thought it wouldn't hurt our children to learn how to work," Ruthalin bristled.

"That's right, son. It's how we solved problems in my day, and it was a tough time then, believe you me."

"What problems does it solve?" Marc cried. "You're barely keeping up."

"And what's so bad about it? Lots of people can't even boast of that."

"Don't tell me how it is for lots of people! Do you think I can't see it for myself? Do you think I don't choke on the two-percent milk every time we eat at the Runyons' 'cause it's so much richer than the powdered stuff Mom mixes up? Do you think we don't notice that they have lots more boxes under their Christmas tree? And some of 'em are as big as furniture! Meanwhile, back at our house, Heidi gets bike streamers made from a bread bag. And she's thrilled! Just like she's thrilled to play dress-up in Mr. Golonka's boots. Do you think we don't notice that lots of people out there aren't asked to wear a dead guy's boots? People think we'd be glad to have 'em! People know the Feldsteds will take stuff nobody else wants!"

"It didn't hurt me, son, and it won't hurt you!" Erval's voice rang from the walls to the ceiling beams to the linoleum. "And the day I'm too proud to wear a perfectly good pair of boots is the day that I . . . ."

"Look here, Dad!" Marc pointed his finger into his father's face. "I can't honor you or whatever by reliving *your* times, *your* problems." He closed up the box flaps, swishing with contempt. "You got answers for ev-

erything, doncha, Dad? But mostly you got answers for problems that aren't around anymore." He picked up his box and left the room.

* * *

April sat on her bed. Looking across the room, she wondered: how could Olivia sleep through the arguing and shouting? Through Marc kicking and throwing things next door? How could Tom sleep through it?

The door opened and Marc looked in. "I need paper."

She scrounged through a pile next to her bed and came up with a few sheets.

"Not the lined stuff," he said. "This is a grown-up message and I don't want some school-boy piece of paper!"

"I'll look around."

When she returned from the kitchen drawer where Mom stored paper and envelopes, he had already retrieved the typewriter from her closet.

"They're talking out there about you. They're saying they don't think they've done enough for you and maybe they need to do something special before you leave."

"Oh, boy. I can't wait."

"What are you writing?"

"My resignation. I'm sick of mowing lawns."

"But you can't quit! You need the money for school."

"Yeah, you're right. I can't quit, not yet. But if I wait until I can, I'll lose my nerve. Then I'll be like *him*: timid." He rolled a piece of paper in. "I wanna see this letter every morning and evening until then." He pounded furiously on the keys. "So what do you think two people like that mean by 'something special'?"

"They're talking about a camping trip."

"Camping!" he snorted. "It figures."

* * *

Two days before Marc's departure for college, Captain Erval banged around in the garage, directing children up the ladder into the attic to retrieve the tents and the lanterns, Ruthalin's cot, and especially the giant Styrofoam cooler, big as a hope chest. He'd gotten it from the hospital, where it was used to transport organs, severed limbs, and other gore.

He dispatched Marc to the Gas-N-Go for bags of ice. When Marc returned, Erval loaded gear onto the little trailer he'd made from salvaged

wood, while April stood in the doorway, holding the phone. "For you, Marc."

She went back to her sandwich- and cookie-packing. But she could hear him—"Hey! How's it goin'?"—until he stretched the phone's long cord far around the corner, into the living room.

He reappeared at the door to the garage, holding the receiver against his thigh. "Where we going, Dad?"

"Sheephouse Neck. Same as last time. We'll be by the river."

Marc carried the phone away again.

"Who called?" April asked when he came through the kitchen again.

He shrugged. "Pack your swimsuit?"

"Why? Come back here! Why do I need my swimsuit?"

"Ya never know."

Soon they were on their way, the whole family plus Ginni packed into the maxi-van, the little trailer wiggling along behind. Erval drove along the gently curving roads, past mailboxes at the end of lanes, past bushes that blew in the van's wake, past the long, low buildings of a chicken farm. The forest closed in, then cleared away for yet another chicken farm.

Once inside the state park, they spread out over three camp sites, pitched their tents, tied their garbage bag to a white ash tree, all while a whistling Erval fanned the campfire to life.

Later, full of hot dogs and marshmallows, Marc fell asleep to the hum of cicadas. He slapped at another mosquito against his bicep and regretted having a father who hated crowds, distrusted oceans, and therefore never took them camping in the sea-breezy air of Nassowango Island.

In the morning, haze hung over the trees and smoke wafted from beneath the griddle where Erval, whistling again, flipped pancakes. Ruthalin yawned, and measured a heaped spoonful of Tang into a pitcher of water.

Erval was eager to try the Foggy Bottom Trail this morning. "But have another pancake, Duane. It's a long time 'til lunch. Derek, you stop fussing with your brother," he shook his spatula, "or you won't be hiking with us!"

As soon as he put the griddle over the fire to burn off the pancake bits, and as soon as Ruthalin released kids from wiping the oilcloth clean and putting away the egg cartons, and as soon as he lined up his troops

and checked their feet on suspicion that someone would try to march into the woods wearing their drugstore thongs—he clapped the fishing hat over his balding head and led off into the woods.

Soon enough, children complained that they would never find camp again, at least not in time for lunch. So Erval sang, in a voice that startled the birds into silence, his wood-tramping theme song, something from his favorite Fred McMurray movie:

Follow me, boys!
Follow me!
When you think you're really beat,
That's the time to lift your feet . . . .

Marc brought up the rear. He even sang along, sort of:

Swallow me, boys,
Swallow me!
Worms and bugs are great to eat,
Mashed to bits by stinky feet. . .

Tom giggled at the words until, as the lead hikers' footsteps echoed across a plank bridge, Heidi began to cry and point at the water below. A pine cone—her hike souvenir—swirled slowly in the river's lazy flow.

"I'll get it!" Tom jumped off the path. Kneeling on the muddy banks, he reached across the water, his fingers closing, dipping, missing.

The sun rose higher. Marc looked at his watch. He pulled his shirt away from his neck. If he wasn't back in camp by 11:00 . . . What were they doing out here, a bunch of sweaty hikers, holding their breath on a plank bridge, and Heidi bawling like the world would end, and Tom wading, stumpy-legged in the water, reaching into the webby world under the bridge? "Can't you get another pine cone?" Marc said. "It's not like they're hard to find out here."

Tom waded back to the bank, empty-handed. He scanned the forest floor. He found a nice, craggy forked branch. Then he returned to the river. He caught the pine cone with his branch, and swept it to shore.

Heidi quit sniffling and they were on their way again. They trudged through spots of shade and sunlight. They slapped bugs attracted by their sweat. Erval promised that, sure thing, they'd rent some fishing poles and

even a couple canoes after lunch, and find a shady spot on the river and . . . Marc looked on at his little brothers' excitement with a cold pity, until finally, *finally,* they found their tents in the clearing again, catching Ruthalin in the act of bagging a dirty diaper.

Marc lifted an upturned bowl on the picnic table and tore off a piece of leftover pancake. He lay along the bench in the gappy shade, still swatting bugs. Then he heard the motor idling out on the camp road.

* * *

April looked up from the rock she still had not coaxed out of her shoe. She saw a shiny Dodge truck turn into the campsite, and Russ Buckman behind the glare of the windshield. How did he know the Feldsteds were here? And behind the truck, a boat hung halfway out into the camp road.

The bass tones of the motor trembled under the trees as Russ greeted her father through the open window. His wife Danae, in all her Ivory-Soap loveliness, with a long braid down her back today, smiled from her side of the cab. And their three boys leaned over from the back seat.

"How's it goin'?" Russ, ever the salesman, acted like Erval's nearest and dearest friend. "I was wondering if we could borrow your son for a little while."

Erval's eyes wandered over to the boat. Russ stepped out of the truck and stood dwarfed beneath the boat's bow, his arms folded, his head tucked back on his neck in a pride-of-ownership swagger. *Yep, new toy. Gonna try it out today.* Erval walked along as Russ ran his hand down the red stripe on the starboard side.

Russ had even christened her already: *Cuni-Babe,* written in fine, swirly script above the stripe.

Erval circled the boat, politely asking about the fuel specs and the trailer hitch, not terribly interested in the answers. But it bought him time to debate with himself. *Do I let him go? Or am I still the dad around here? Am I still the one in charge?*

He might have saved himself the trouble, for when he and Russ finished their lap around the boat, Marc hoisted a duffle bag into the truck bed and brushed off his hands.

"Ready to go, buddy?" Russ asked.

"Sure enough."

Small brothers clung to Marc's t-shirt. "Can we go too?" Heidi pled with Erval, "What about me, Daddy?"

Erval looked over the babbling defection before him. He frowned and opened his mouth. Nothing came out.

"Wellll," Russ looked at Danae, "I don't know about today. Maybe . . . How old are you?" He clapped Tom on the shoulder.

"Sixteen."

"Tell you what. We'll take anybody sixteen or over today, and then we'll pick another day to take the rest of you."

April wiggled her heel into her now-rockless shoe. She caught her breath. He might as well have invited her to step onto the mountain slopes of a calendar picture, the idea was so exotic and delicious. No wonder Marc warned that one never knew when one might need a swimsuit. She had heeded the warning, annoyed as she was with all his crypto-mystery.

She climbed into the truck bed. Ginni, Marc, and Tom were already settled against its hard metal ribs. They grinned at their amazing luck. They laughed loud and joked with Danae and refused to look at anyone but each other, because if their eyes wandered just three inches to the left, there would be all those disappointed faces staring back at them, and Dad, too, standing there with his thumbs in his belt, his shoulders hunched, his eyes squinting against a sudden patch of mid-day sun that shone down on his bewildered head.

Maybe Dad would forgive this. Maybe he would understand that any kid would want to feel speed and spray and sun-dappled water. And if he couldn't give it to them, he should let them go with somebody who could.

The wind plastered April's hair across her face as they sped past forests and chicken farms again, as they turned on the landing road. They passed through a village where miniature lighthouses and wishing wells adorned the lawns of porchy old homes, where ivy girdled the shady trees. Beyond the village, the trees gave way to marsh grasses. Then the road disappeared into the glittery waters of Nassowango Bay.

Russ turned the truck on the broad apron of asphalt. April hoisted herself out of the truck bed and stood with Ginni under a lonely-looking streetlight. Out in the lapping waters, a fortress of broken pilings guarded the approach to a forlorn old crabbing shack. Far out into the water stood Nassowango Island, a faint purple streak on the horizon.

Russ, grinning in his Ray-Bans, backed the *Cuni-Babe* down the land-

ing, between two piers, directed by Marc and Tom. Danae, on the pier, snapped her sons into life jackets.

Then they were off.

The afternoon wore itself away as they bounced along ahead of the boat's churning wake. April knelt on the back bench, elbows on the stern, bathing in the spray. She lent a hand to dripping skiers as they climbed up the ladder. All of them but Danae were bumbling novices, but April cheered when Tom managed both feet on one ski, if only for a moment. She gasped when a sharp and thrilling turn of the boat swung Marc across the wake, where he nearly collided with one of those crab-shack pilings. As for her own turn in the water, she mostly remembered Ginni, over on the other ski rope, screaming her amusement-park scream.

Russ idled the boat out on the bobbing waters and Danae produced cheese sandwiches and Orange Crush. She ducked into the cuddy cabin to change her toddler's diaper. When she emerged again, she smoothed out a blue cotton hat. "The sun's getting to you, young lady," Danae said, and she settled the hat on Ginni's head.

Ginni looked out from under the floppy brim. "Do I look like an old-lady gardener now?"

"With all the lime green and magenta in that beach towel," said April, "you look like a color-blind old lady gardener. You know, you don't have to stay wrapped in your towel like that."

"I do, too. My legs are white and horrible."

April sighed. "We're all friends around here. Nobody cares."

Ginni raised her chin and tucked the towel more firmly around her waist. Then she stood to watch as they reeled Jeremy Buckman out into the water. He wanted to try the one-ski trick himself.

April turned her face up to the sun and played a mental slide show of the day. She saw Marc, his wet hair separated into curls; Tom offering a corner of his sandwich to the youngest Buckman; Ginni who, with one hand on her hat and the other gripping her towel knot, smiled into the breeze. She also saw her father, slouched and unreadable, looking up at Russ's truck as it drove away, but she blinked the image away and looked out over the rippled bay.

When the rope played out and the *Cuni-Babe* jerked into motion, the knot in Ginni's towel loosened. All that lime green and magenta fell away. She scrambled to catch it. Her hands fussed and tucked.

Meanwhile, the wind lifted the brim of her blue hat and carried it away to the water. Ginni stood, surprised, patting her head.

Marc tugged on Russ's Hawaiian shirt. It was his wife's hat, after all.

Russ cut the motor and looked back.

"I'll get it," said Tom, and he dove over the side of the boat.

Whale-humping through the sparkling waters, he followed the patch of blue. It floated away as if it had envied every other creature on the bay today and wanted to show that it, too, knew how to skim the waves.

When Tom returned, he perched on the swim ladder, rubbing water out of his eyes. He grinned, all Boy-Scouty and helpful, in spite of the way Jeremy pushed past him on the ladder, which made the hat leap into the water again.

"Aaah!" Tom jumped after it.

All hands on deck untangled lines, handing Jeremy his, stowing the others. When Russ was satisfied, he turned the key and put his hands on the throttle of the now-humming boat.

April rested in her seat. The purr of the accelerating boat made her drowsy. Marc, up in the spotter's seat, rested back on his elbows.

Then April felt the bump.

She looked at Marc. Had he felt it too? He ran a languid hand through his hair, then turned to look at her. Reading the disquiet in her eyes, he sat up. "Where's Tom?"

She tried to remember the bump. Was it a scrape? A mere tap? Maybe just a little rock of the boat? No, there was a definite catch-and-release to it.

"Russ, cut the motor!" Marc shouted. "I said—" he gave Russ a streetfight shove, "—cut the motor!"

April looked over the edge. As Marc jumped in the water, a blue hat floated in the dying wake. She sank against the wall of the boat. She summoned up Tom's face, the grinning, dripping one of just a minute ago. It seemed terribly important to hold on to that face.

But the face that rose from the water was pale and stunned. Tom's eyes darted from the sound of Marc's shouts to Danae shooing the children up to the cockpit. Flaglets of blood swirled in the water around his emerging body until his leg appeared.

Then, April only heard Ginni, vomiting over the side of the boat.

* * *

April gathered the blanket tighter around her shoulders. Some blue-haired volunteer had handed it to her. She looked now in the mirror at her own curls, dried, finally, and mussed from dozing against the wall out in the waiting room.

She opened the bathroom door. Down the hallway, past the nurses' station, a nurse stepped in on her parents. They rose.

They'd been waiting, watching doorways, rising like this for hours. First, it was the doctor, talking in hushed and authoritative tones, saying things like *Four units . . . Mid-shaft, like this,* as his hands sliced across the meaty part of his own calf.

Completely severed?

Fortunately not but, and whatever the doctor said next made Ruthalin's hand fly to her mouth. April didn't need to hear it. She had seen the tangled meat and protruding bone herself. She had watched the blood soak through Ginni's precious towel while waiting eons for the Coast Guard boat.

Save the leg?

The doctor had crossed hairy arms over his scrubs.

How do you deliver bad news? How do you drop barbells without cracking the floor?

They can try. He's gone upstairs. You can wait there.

And now, here they were. Every time April had nodded off, then awakened to the jolly sounds of TV-land from the softly humming set in the corner, the world felt as normal as dust motes and lawnmower noise. She could almost believe Tom sat up in bed right now, laughing and happy, the little brother she had always known. But now, the canned laughter and Pepsi jingles had given way to the national anthem.

And that nurse stood there. She held out the clipboard and pen to Dad.

A clipboard could mean lots of things. More units of blood, maybe. Or transfer to another hospital. April stood at the corner of the station, where two nurses chattered about perms for men. *It doesn't mean they tried and couldn't save it.*

He did not reach for the clipboard.

He did not look at his wife's stricken face.

The chatter died away. The two nurses looked at the waiting room, at April, at each other. The tall one with the coarse hair smiled, sympathy with a professional polish. News travels fast in a hospital, April guessed.

That was Erv Feldsted's kid they brought in this afternoon. Nice guy, Erv. Tough, tough break.

And Erval Feldsted lifted the pen away from the clipboard and handed it back to the nurse.

April turned for the elevator. Inside, she pressed the button she knew best, B for basement.

The doors opened. They revealed, behind the gleam of vending machine glass, Pay-Days and Snickers, hard-puck bear claws, greenish tuna sandwiches. She leaned her forehead on the glass, trying to decide. But she knew none of it would help.

She wondered where to go next. To the right, the night lights of the silent cafeteria glowed out into the hallway. To the left, she knew every bend and doorknob and nameplate.

She turned left.

Just beyond the last corner, she found Marc, on the floor outside Dad's office. His elbows rested on his drawn-up knees. His feet were a cold, waxy white, slipped into Russ's sandals.

He looked up, troubled and whisker-shadowed. He slid his back up the door, struggling to his feet.

She held out the blanket to him.

He took it, his fingers fumbling with the edges.

She lost patience and gathered him into her arms. He clung to her, the blanket rumpled between them. She would have let go, but a cry—deep and strange and lonely—rose up out of him, and then another. And another. And another, echoing down the hallway outside his father's office.

* * *

The bus engine hummed, emitting a steady chug of fumes, its cargo doors opened up like bent insect legs. She hesitated, then threw her arms around Marc's neck. "Dad would've come if he could," she told him.

"Yeah, sure."

With one last mirthless smile, he was up the steps. His face appeared in the window.

She stood, pinned to the oily, gum-dotted sidewalk, seeing this thing through until the bus creaked away from the gate and rolled toward Mill Street. It waited there, its turn signal blinking like a bored zoo lion at high

noon. Then, moving into a break in the traffic, it wheezed down the street.

April got into the car, alone.